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ABSTRACT

Questionnaires completed by 607 middle school and high school students provided data about the learning of selected advertising-related cognitions among adolescents and on the short-term effect of these cognitions and other communication variables on adolescent consumption behavior. Among the findings were the following: susceptibility to advertising was positively related to amount of mass media use, exposure to mass media entertainment content, and amount of family communication about consumption matters, and negatively related to age and socioeconomic status; girls appeared to be more susceptible than boys to advertising; no significant correlates to adolescents' general attitudes toward advertising were found; perceived credibility of advertising was positively related to amount of exposure to entertainment and public affairs content in the mass media and negatively related to socioeconomic status; and retention of advertising information was positively related to age, amount of communication with family and friends about consumption matters, and socioeconomic status. The findings also suggest that adolescent consumer behavior may stem from social learning processes rather than from exposure to mass media or advertising. (GT)

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MASS MEDIA INFLUENCE ON ADOLESCENT CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

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One of the most durable issues in marketing deals with the effects of mass media on consumers. Business critics are concerned with the power of mass media to synthesize and stimulate wants. Defenders of mass media respond to this challenge by citing things such as the high failure rates of new products and the difficulties involved in changing consumers' attitudes.

While debates over the "powers" of the mass media have existed for several decades, it was just a few years ago that the issue became of greatest relevance to public policy makers as a result of charges made by various consumer groups about the effects of marketing activities (particularly television advertising) on young people. At recent FTC hearings, for example, advertising critics argued that advertising strongly influences the youth and results in "undesirable" socialization (e.g., need to consume). On the other hand, defenders of advertising practices have responded by stating that the family is primarily responsible for what young people learn about consumption behavior, and that advertising simply sets up the agenda for positive parent-child interaction and provides consumption-learning experiences and for the child (Banks, 1971; Robertson, 1972).

This study examines mass media and interpersonal influences on adolescent consumer behavior. Since adolescence is a crucial period for socialization--a time when much of consumer learning takes place with mass media, parents and peers serving as significant sources of consumer information shaping the person's consumer-related patterns of thinking and behaving (e.g., Stephens and Moore, 1975; Moore and Stephens, 1975)--adolescents appear to be an ideal group to use in investigating media effects. Specifically, the study has two main objectives:

1. To investigate the learning of selected advertising-related cognitions among adolescents.
2. To assess the short-term effect of these advertising-related cognitions and other communication variables on adolescent consumption behavior.

Background

Research relevant to the learning of patterns of thinking and behaving that comprise consumer behavior is based mainly on two models of human learning: the cognitive developmental model and the social learning model. The cognitive developmental approach essentially views learning as a cognitive psychological process of adjustment to one's environment, with age used as a proxy variable for cognitive development. The social learning model, on the other hand, focuses on sources of influence--commonly known as "socialization agents"--transmitting attitudes, motivations, and values to the person. Learning is assumed to be taking place during the person's interaction with socialization agents (e.g., family, mass media) in various social settings (McLeod and O'Keefe, 1972). Consumer learning as a social process contrasts with the view that learning is merely a criterion state of knowledge. The mass media, for example, may be seen as agents of consumer socialization rather than simply dispensers of product information (Ward and Wackman, 1971) because they may serve to shape consumer attitudes and behaviors (Moore and Stephens, 1975).

In this study, consumer learning is viewed not only as a cognitive psychological process of adjustment to one's environment but also as a social process. Because consumer learning may be affected by variables

such as social class and sex that locate the person in his social environment (Ward, 1974; Moore and Stephens, 1975), this study also investigates the influence of such factors.

Figure 1 shows the general conceptual model of consumer learning used in this research. The model includes hypothesized relationships between antecedent variables, intervening learning cognitive reactions to advertising and outcomes in terms of the adolescent's consumption behavior. (Relationships between these variables are discussed later in the article.)

The authors recognize the limitations of cross-sectional studies, such as this one, in determining "causality." However, they feel the main value of correlational data is in falsification of hypotheses, not in confirming them in a positive sense (Popper, 1959). So if it is found, for example, that susceptibility to advertising and need for consumption are not statistically related in the short-run, the researchers would be inclined to accept the null hypothesis and cease speculating on "causal" links between the two variables. This is precisely the same kind of reasoning used by Klapper (1960) and others, in concluding that TV viewing does not induce aggression in youngsters (cf. Chaffee and McLeod, 1971).

Methods

Self-administered questionnaires were completed by 607 adolescents in middle schools and high schools in Kentucky and North Carolina during the Winter of 1975. In general, respondents were evenly divided between males and females in each sample, with 205 middle school students and 402 high school students completing the questionnaire. Although logistics prevented random selection of subjects, comparisons

of 1970 census figures with respondent socioeconomic sample means (using Duncan's two-digit-percentile SES index) indicated that from a socioeconomic point of view, the subjects were a fair representation of youth in each region. The mean Duncan SES for the total sample was 50.2 based on the father's occupation.

Cognitive Reaction Variables. In this study the following advertising-related cognitions are examined: susceptibility to advertising, attitudes toward advertising in general, perceived credibility of advertising, and message retention. Measurement of these variables involved summing several items. The first three variables consisted of scales developed by factoranalyzing items relevant to the areas of priority interest. Items that significantly loaded (.50 or greater) on the hypothesized factors were then summed to form the scale.

Susceptibility to advertising was based on the degree of interest in and attention paid to advertising by the respondent, and on the desire to have products he or she saw advertised. A typical item for this measure was "When I hear or see something advertised, I often want to buy it," with the response measured along a 5-point "strongly agree-strongly disagree" Likert-type scale.

General attitudes toward advertising were based upon the respondent's affective orientations toward liking/disliking of advertising. One of the three items used to construct this variable was "Most people my age would be better off if there was less advertising." Perceived credibility of advertisements was based on the respondent's perception of the "honesty" of television, newspaper, radio, and magazine ads. Responses were measured on a 5-point "Very honest-very dishonest" scale. Finally, message retention was operationally defined as simple cognitive

recall of information in advertisements, and it was measured by summing on a 0- to 12-point index representing correct answers to twelve slogans selected at random during prime-time programs over a two-week period. Typical items were " _____, the Quicker Picker Upper" and " _____, the cavity fighter."

Communication Variables. In line with previous studies of consumer learning, the influence of three socialization agents (mass media, family, and peers) was conceptualized in terms of agent-adolescent interaction processes.

Both general and specific items were included to measure the extent to which these young people interact with the mass media. General media use was measured similarly to previous studies (Ward and Wackman, 1971; Moore and Stephens, 1975), by how much time the adolescent had spent with the particular medium (TV, radio, newspapers, and magazines) the previous day. Responses were summed to provide a measure of the amount of mass media use. Adolescents were also asked to indicate on a 5-point "very often-never" scale how frequently they read news about the government and politics, news about the economy, and advertisements in the newspaper and how often they watch the national news on television. Responses to these items were summed to form a measure of the person's exposure to public affairs in the media. A similar measure of exposure to entertainment was derived by summing responses to questions on how often students read or viewed entertainment items in the mass media. Entertainment included comics and sports in the newspaper, and movies, talk shows, cartoons, and police and adventure shows on television.

Nine items were included to determine the extent to which the adolescent interacts with his parents about consumption matters. Two dimensions for this interaction were revealed by factor analysis. Five

items measured communication from the adolescent to the parent. A typical adolescent-parent communication about a consumption item was "I tell my parents what I think about things they buy for themselves" with the respondent expected to indicate frequency on a 5-point "very often - never" scale. The remaining four items focused on interpersonal communication from the parent to the adolescent. A typical parent-adolescent communication about a consumption item was "My parents tell me when they like or do not like something I have bought for myself." Responses were summed across items.

Respondents were also asked about the extent to which they learn from friends and friends learn from them "about buying things," and about trust in friends and friends' trust in them concerning buying decisions. Responses were measured on a 5-point "most of the time - never" scale and were summed across the five items to form a trust in and communication with friends measure.

Consumption Variables. The concept of "buying behavior" was not meant to include measures of the various aspects that comprise consumer acts in the marketplace. Instead, specific consumption related items were included for the purpose of gathering information for determining the power of mass media and advertising to create and manipulate demand--i.e., the "need to consume."

Five variables were used to measure adolescent consumption needs and behaviors. The first consumption variable was absolute amount of money spent on goods and services by the adolescents. Respondents were asked to indicate "about how much money they usually spend in a week." A second consumption variable was based on the amount of money spent relative to the respondent's available income. To construct this

variable, respondents were asked to indicate the average amount of money they receive weekly from various sources (work, allowance, other). This measure was expressed as a percentage of the average available weekly income.

Because previous research suggests that most adolescents have some form of part-time job, it was felt that the child's consumption would be reflected in working motivations. Therefore, those adolescents who indicated they "worked for money"¹ were asked to specify the reasons they work. Among the reasons listed were "I work to save for something special" and "I work to have more spending money." Since work provides a means for satisfying certain consumption needs, the researchers considered responses to these questions as measures of the extent of the respondent's work motivations for anticipatory consumption and work motivations for immediate consumption, respectively. Since some adolescents could be working sporadically (e.g., only when they want to buy something) and may not have been working when they were being questioned, a more general variable was designed to tap the adolescent motivation for consumption in the long-run. Respondents were asked to indicate how often they work so they can have more money to spend. Responses were recorded on a 5-point "quite a lot - never" scale to form the overall work motivations for consumption measure.

Cognitive Reactions to Advertising

Previous research has suggested that certain advertising-related cognitions may be undergoing formation and change during adolescence

¹In this sample, a little over 50% of the adolescents questioned said they "worked somewhere for money."

as a result of maturation. For example, James (1971) found that believability in and attention to advertising varies with age. In addition, certain advertising-related cognitions may be developing as a result of the adolescent's interaction with various socialization agents. For example, attitudes toward advertising, cognitive recall of television advertising, and perceived credibility of advertising in various media were found to be differentially related to the amount of time the adolescent viewed television and communication about consumption matters with parents and peers (Moore et al., 1975, 1976; Ward and Wackman, 1971). On the basis of the findings of these studies, it was expected that communication and demographic variables would be related to the cognitive reaction variables (Figure 1).

Table 1 shows relationships between each cognitive reaction variable and relevant explanatory variables. Most explanatory variables correlated significantly with susceptibility to advertising. Among the mass-media-use variables, the amount of mass media were the strongest significant predictors. Intrafamily communication about consumption may be a second-order consequence of the child's susceptibility to advertising (Ward and Wackman, 1972). Alternatively, it could be the effect of interpersonal communication, which may condition the child's perception in terms of greater attention and interest in advertised products.

Maturation development, indexed by the interviewee's grade in school, is also a significant predictor of the adolescent's become less susceptible to advertising with age. The strongest demographic predictors, however, are socioeconomic status and sex. The negative relationship between socioeconomic status and susceptibility to advertising

suggests that better educated parents may teach their children to develop an immunity to advertising by paying less attention to, and showing less interest in, the advertised products. It was also noted that female adolescents appear to be more susceptible to advertising than male adolescents.

Adolescent attitudes toward advertising were not significantly related to any of the independent variables. Lack of significant relationship between age and attitudes toward advertising suggests that this kind of cognitive response to advertising may be developed by early adolescence. These findings supported results of previous studies, which found no significant explanatory variables of adolescents' attitudes toward advertising (Ward and Wackman, 1971; Moore and Stephens, 1975).

Three variables correlated significantly with perceived credibility of advertising. The strongest predictor was exposure to public affairs content in the mass media, followed by exposure to entertainment. The negative relationship between perceived credibility of advertising in the various media and socioeconomic status suggests that adolescents in lower social classes may be placing greater faith in advertising claims than their upper-class counterparts.

Maturation was the best explanatory factor associated with the adolescent's ability to retain information in advertising messages, suggesting that the cognitive developmental model of human learning may best explain the acquisition of this particular cognitive skill. Socioeconomic status was also positively related with message retention, suggesting that upper-class adolescents are more likely to retain information they see or hear in advertisements than are their counterparts.

The positive relationships between adolescent-parent, peer trust and communication, and message retention suggest that these young people are more likely to retain advertising information when they expect to use it in interpersonal discussions (Ward and Wackman, 1971).

Communication Effects

The second concern of this study was in how adolescent consumption behavior and motivations for consumption are developed, particularly the effects of the mass media, including advertising and interpersonal communications (Figure 1). Because adolescents are exposed to varying amounts of mass media (i.e., different numbers of advertisements) and different lifestyles and characters portrayed in various programs, the researchers expected to find relationships between the mass media variables and the five types of behavioral measures designed to tap the adolescent's consumption behavior and motivations for consumption. In order to investigate direct shortrun effects of advertising on adolescent consumer behavior, the researchers also included cognitive reactions to advertising variables. Finally, consumer behavior may be a social process rather than simply the direct effect of, for example, the mass media (Ward and Wackman, 1971). To test this proposition, interpersonal communication variables were included.

Table 2 shows relationships between the explanatory and consumption-related variables used in this research. Contrary to expectations, the mass-media-use variable is not related to the criterion measures, suggesting that an adolescent's mere exposure to the amount (number) of advertisements in the mass media has no significant short-term effect on the development of consumption-related motivations and behaviors.

That advertising has weak short-term effects on adolescent consumer behavior is also attested to by the weak, negative relationships found between 1) susceptibility to advertising, 2) attitudes toward advertising, and 3) credibility of advertising, and the criterion behavioral measures. The "weekly spendings" variable was negatively related to the frequency of adolescent-parent communication about consumption, suggesting that intrafamily communication about consumption matters may be initiated by the child because he thinks he has inadequate spending money. A significant negative relationship also exists between adolescent-parent communication and proportion of the adolescent's available income spent. Thus, adolescents who spend less of their weekly income are more likely to discuss consumption matters with their parents than are adolescents who spend more of their available money.

Intrafamily communication about consumption generally appears to the extent that the adolescent works to save money for anticipatory consumption, especially for large ticket items. This particular behavior is presumably encouraged by parents ($r = .16$, $p < .001$) in the process of talking to the adolescent about consumption matters.

While the long-term consumption plans appear to be discussed within the family, day-to-day consumption plans may be discussed with peers ($r = .11$, $p < .01$). General working motivations for consumption are associated with both adolescent-parent and peer communication about consumption.

Age is a strong predictor of the money spent on goods and services by the adolescent, suggesting that adolescents acquire greater independence in buying goods as they grow older. The significant negative relationship between socioeconomic status and average weekly spendings, on the one hand,

and the positive relationship between socioeconomic status and general working motivations for consumption on the other, suggest that upper social-class families may grant their children less independence in buying and force the child to work for money to meet his day-to-day consumption needs.

Summary and Discussion

This study is based on self-administered interviews with 607 adolescents in two states. The study investigated the development of cognitive orientations to advertising as well as mass media and interpersonal influences on the learning of different aspects of consumption motivations and behaviors.

With respect to the development of the four cognitive orientations to advertising examined, the finding

1. Susceptibility to advertising is positively related to the adolescent's amount of mass media use, exposure to entertainment content in the mass media, and the amount of intrafamily communication about consumption matters. It is negatively related to age and socioeconomic status. Female adolescents also appear to be more susceptible to advertising influence than their male counterparts.
2. No significant correlates to adolescents' general attitudes toward advertising were found.
3. Perceived credibility of advertising in the various media is positively related to the amount of exposure to entertainment and public affairs content in the mass media, and negatively related to socioeconomic status.

4. Retention of information in advertising messages is positively related to the amount of intrafamily communication about consumption from the adolescent to the parent, trust in and communication with friends about consumption matters, age, and socioeconomic status.

With respect to advertising, mass and interpersonal communication effects on the learning of consumption-related motivations and behaviors, the following conclusions can be made:

1. Mere exposure to advertisements and favorable cognitive orientations toward advertising have no significant short-term effects on consumption-related motivations and behaviors. However, the learning of certain consumption motivations and behaviors seems to be a function of the adolescent's exposure to entertainment and public affairs content in the mass media.
2. Interpersonal communication processes with parents and peers are significant variables in predicting the learning of different kinds of consumer behaviors. Apparently, parents teach their children budgeting skills and the importance of work as a means of gratifying long-term consumption desires.
3. Socioeconomic status is an important variable in predicting certain kinds of consumer learning. Specifically, upper social-class adolescents seem to be granted less independence to make buying decisions by their families and learn to satisfy consumption needs through work to a significantly greater extent than their lower-class counterparts.

These findings suggest that learning various kinds of orientations toward advertising and consumer behavior is mainly a social learning process. Although previous writers speculated that media advertising may be shaping the content and form of interpersonal communications (Ward and Wackman, 1971), this study found that mere exposure to any amount of advertising did not set the scene for interpersonal communications about consumption matters. For example, the correlations between the amount of mass media use and intrafamily communications were minimal, and the amount of mass media use was negatively related to the adolescent's frequency of communication with his peers (Table 3). Instead, the amount of interpersonal communications with parents and peers about consumer goods and services appears to contribute to the child's awareness of the relevance of goods and service, which is shown by his increasing interest in advertisements (attention to, interest in, and desire for advertised products) and selective exposure to relevant content in the mass media such as reading ads and consumer news in the newspaper.

In summary, from the short-term perspective these findings provide little support for the idea that the mass media creates desires, which in turn cause people to work harder to earn the necessary money to satisfy these desires (Galbraith, 1958, p. 158). Instead, the data tend to suggest that the material value system "arose out of basic socialization processes that go far deeper than the current mediated influence through the mass media" (Kotler, 1973, p. 807).

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Figure 1

General Model of Consumer Learning Used in the Present Research

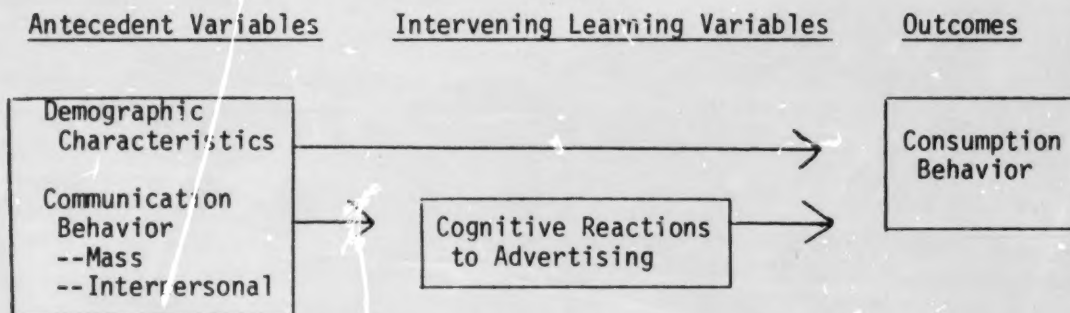


Table 1

Relationships Between Cognitive Reactions to Advertising and Explanatory Variables^a (N = 607)

<u>Explanatory Variables</u>	<u>Susceptibility</u>	<u>Attitudes</u>	<u>Credibility</u>	<u>Retention</u>
<u>Communication Variables</u>				
<u>Mass Media:</u>				
Amount Used	.09*	.01	.02	-.04
Exposure to entertainment	.13***	.03	.10**	.07
Exposure to public affairs	.07	.06	.13***	.07
<u>Interpersonal:</u>				
Parent-adolescent	.16***	.03	.03	.02
Adolescent-parent	.10**	-.02	.01	.09*
Peer trust and communication	.06	.06	.00	.09*
<u>Demographics</u>				
Age	-.08*	.01	-.07	.30***
Socioeconomic status	-.19***	-.03	-.09*	.13***
Sex	.18***	.01	.01	-.06

^a Entries are Pearsonian product-moment correlations.

*p < .05

**p < .01

***p < .001

Table 2

Relationships Between Measures of Consumption Behavior and Explanatory Variables^a (N = 607)

<u>Explanatory Variables</u>	<u>Average Weekly Spending</u>	<u>Proportion of Available \$ Spent</u>	<u>Anticipatory Consumption Work Motives</u>	<u>Immediate Consumption Work Motives</u>	<u>Overall Consumption Work Motives</u>
<u>Mass Media</u>					
Amount of Use	-.11**	.04	-.02	-.05	-.08*
Entertainment	.03	-.02	.09*	.06	.12**
Public Affairs	-.03	-.13***	.08*	.01	.10*
<u>Cognitive Reactions to Ads</u>					
Susceptibility	.06	-.02	.04	-.01	-.01
Attitudes	.04	-.06	.03	-.03	-.11**
Credibility	-.06	-.08*	.01	-.11**	.00
Retention	.13***	.00	.05	.09*	.07
<u>Interpersonal Communication</u>					
Parent-adolescent	.06	-.02	.16***	.07	-.00
Adolescent-parent	-.10**	-.08*	.08*	.05	.11**
Peer trust & Communication	.03	-.00	.00	.11**	.11**
<u>Demographics</u>					
Age	.27***	-.03	-.02	-.01	.06
Socioeconomic status	-.11**	-.01	-.03	.08*	.15***
Sex	-.04	-.01	.01	-.02	-.05

^aEntries are Pearsonian product-moment correlations.

*p < .05

**p < .01

***p < .001

Table 3

Correlation Matrix for Independent Variables^a

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Sex								
2. Grade	-.03							
3. Socioeconomic status	.01	.11*						
4. Amount of mass media use	-.00	-.16*	-.15*					
5. Consumer affairs exposure	-.05	.21*	.10*	.33*				
6. Entertainment exposure	-.12*	-.09*	-.05	.18*	-.19*			
7. Adolescent-parent communication about consumption	.09*	.06	.06	-.01	.15*	.09*		
8. Parent-adolescent communication about consumption	.00	-.04	.01	.01	.26*	.17*	.29*	
9. Peer trust and communication	.00	.19*	.10*	-.10*	.19*	.02	.24*	.23*

^aTable entries are product-moment correlations. Correlations of approximately .08 (*) are significantly different from zero ($p = .05$).